

2017 Spring Gobbler Survey Report

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Since 1987 the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) has sought the assistance of avid spring gobbler hunters to participate in this survey that is intended to provide important biological information about turkey populations. This long-term survey provides important information for the Department's wild turkey management program. Furthermore, the survey provides an excellent platform to survey hunter attitudes and opinions regarding spring hunting. This year will mark the 30th anniversary of the Spring Gobbler Season (SGS) survey, and special thanks are extended to those individuals that have participated since the survey began and others that have participated for many years.

Your participation in the 2017 Spring Gobbler Hunter Survey will provide information that is valuable to the Department's turkey management program. The survey also provides a lot of information that many hunters find useful, and at times, opportunities to share good laughs and the miracles of nature. In addition, as a token of appreciation for your participation in the survey, the Department provides cooperators with a copy of our Virginia Wildlife Calendar. If you participated last year and did not receive a calendar please let me know. Sometimes cooperators forget to include their mailing address or I receive a survey that was damaged by the Postal Service and your name and address are missing. So, if you participated last year and did not get a calendar please send me an email (gary.norman@dgif.virginia.gov) or call 540-248-9360. Thanks to Jimmy Poole, VDGIF Volunteer, for summarizing your comments and remarks.

2017 Results and Discussion

The number of survey cooperators (255) decreased when compared to last year (311). Cooperators in the 2017 survey submitted information on 2,854 hunts, more than last year where cooperators hunted 2,544 days. The geographic distribution of survey respondents was good as reports were submitted from 93 counties and cities.

Statewide Gobbling and Harvest Rates

There was a modest increase (4%) in the number of gobblers heard per hour in 2017 compared to 2016 (Table 1). The 2017 gobbling rate was slightly below the 5-year average (Table 1).

Harvest rates in 2017 were 9% higher than 2016 (Table 1). The 2017 harvest rate was near the 5-year average (Table 1). The increase in gobbling and harvest rates was similar to the increase in the statewide harvest of gobblers by electronic checking (9%).

These gobbling and harvest rates suggests turkey populations are still near record levels for the state (Fig.1). Since the survey has begun in 1987, gobbling rates have increased 1.6% annually. While our turkey populations have generally increased over the past 10 years, we do have concerns about some counties, notably Alleghany, Augusta, Bath, Highland, and Rockingham. Fall seasons in these five counties have been reduced to two weeks.

Table 1. Statewide gobbling (gobbles/hour) and harvest rates (kill/100 hours) in Virginia from 2015-17.

Year	Gobbling/Hour	Kill/100 Hours
2013	0.59	2.9
2014	0.53	2.3
2015*	0.63	2.9
2016	0.40	2.3
2017	0.50	2.5
Average	0.53	2.6

2015* was record statewide harvest.

Gobbling and Harvest Rates by Region

Gobbler hunters in counties east of the Blue Ridge Mountains (EBR) have averaged hearing more birds than those hunting in counties west of the Blue Ridge Mountains (WBR) over the past 5 years (Table 2). However, in 2017 gobbling rates were essentially identical in both Regions.

EBR harvest rates did exceed WBR harvest rates in 2017 (Table 2). Harvest rates in 2017 equaled the 5-year average for both EBR and WBR counties (Table 2). Both gobbling and harvest rates peaked in 2015 in this survey. The modern-day spring harvest record (reported electronically) was set in 2015 for Virginia.

For this report, six physiographic regions were used to investigate estimates at smaller spatial scales (Fig. 1). Gobbler hunters in the Southwest heard more birds per hour than any other region of the state in 2017 (Fig. 4). Gobbling was similar among other regions of the state in 2017.

The 2017 region gobbling rates were very different from the record setting 2015 season. Gobbling in 2015 was highest in the two Piedmont and Tidewater Region (Fig. 4).

Harvest rates (kill/100 hrs.) were higher in the Tidewater, Southwest, and Western Piedmont Regions in 2017 (Fig. 5). The Central Mountain Region continues to lag behind other regions in harvest rates (Fig. 5).

Table 2. Region gobbling (heard/hour) and harvest rates (killed/100 hours) by east of the Blue Ridge counties (EBR) and west of the Blue Ridge (WBR) counties in 2017.

Year	Gobbling Rate (heard/hour)		Harvest Rate (killed/100 hours)	
	EBR	WBR	EBR	WBR
2013	0.49	0.47	2.4	2.2
2014	0.55	0.50	2.5	2.1
2015	0.70	0.54	3.2	2.5
2016	0.49	0.47	2.4	2.2
2017	0.50	0.51	2.6	2.3
Average	0.55	0.50	2.6	2.3

Gobbling and Harvest Rates by Week and Day

Gobbling rates (heard/hour) rates in 2017 were highest on opening day, April 8 (Fig. 7). Gobbling declined though the following Thursday (April 12) then made an early season recovery through April 15. Gobbling then declined steadily through April 25. Following that, there was a mid-season rebound that lasted about 5 days, ending on April 30. This is about the time most hens have begun incubating nests. Gobbling declined through the end of the season, dropping sharply on the last weekend.

Harvest rates (kill/100 hours) generally followed gobbling rates through the season except the last 5 days of the season (Fig.7). As the season ended hunters enjoyed the highest harvest rates of the season. The paradox here is that day was the lowest gobbling rate of the season. I have often heard good turkey hunters say that if you can find a gobbling bird at the end of the season you have a very good chance of killing that bird. These data seem to prove them right.

Gobbling Intensity

Gobbling intensity was grouped into three categories (No Gobbling, Roost/Poor, or Fair-Good). Throughout the five-week season, more than 40 percent of all hunts were reported as Roost/Poor (Fig. 8). Nearly one-third of hunts in the first three weeks were reported as Fair/Good. However, Fair/Good gobbling intensity dropped to 23% and 22% in the last 2 weeks of the season, respectively.

The percentage of hunts reported with No Gobbling started low (15%) in the first week but steadily increased through the season to peak in the last week of the season (40%). Based on intensity, the best hunting period was the first three weeks of the season.

While gobbling intensity and gobbling (heard/hr.) were lower at the end of the season, harvest rates during the last week of the season were very high. Thus, while challenging, those that take up end of the season hunting enjoy higher odds of connecting with a gobbler, if they can just find a gobbling bird.

Cooperator Profile

Cooperators averaged hunting 50 hours through the season. Hunters reported hearing 5,438 birds for an average of 25 birds per hunter. Twenty-two percent of those birds heard were “Called In”. The cooperator or their Partner killed one-third of birds “Called In”. These rates are comparable to recent years.

There were 5 Sundays during the 2017 season (excluding Youth and Apprentice). Sunday participation was modest as it accounted for 8% of all the hunts taken. Of those hunts that took place on Sundays, most of the effort took place on the first Sunday (37%). Participation during the other Sundays was similar as each Sunday accounted for 15-18% of the total Sunday effort.

2017 Survey Questionnaire Results

Given the recent fatality with fanning in Virginia, we asked a series of questions about fanning, in hopes to learn more about the prevalence of the technique, success using it, and cooperators opinions about fanning. Most (89%) cooperators were aware of fanning. However, few cooperators (11%) used the technique in 2017. Of the 11% of cooperators that used fanning in 2017, most began using it recently. The earliest use of fanning took place in 2012. Some (22%) Cooperators knew other hunters that fanned. Of the 33 cooperators that fanned, many reported those hunts ended most of the time without success (57%). Some (29%) said fanning worked sometimes; others (14%) reported fanning was successful most of the times they used it.

The reason why fanning was used was cooperators concerns for their safety (91%). However, of those hunters that used fanning, the majority (71%) had no concerns for their safety.

When asked about their opinions on banning fanning, 51% of cooperators indicated they would support a such a proposal; however, 29% indicated they would not support such a proposal. A good number of cooperators (20%) did not have any opinion about prohibiting fanning.

There was one other question in the 2017 survey dealing with regulations. We asked if cooperators would support increasing the daily bag limit to two birds per day. A majority (61%) opposed increasing the daily bag. However, some (32%) supported a higher bag limit. A few (6%) had no opinion on the topic.

Ten cooperators reported seeing hogs while gobbler hunting. Hogs were sighted in Alleghany, Wythe, Madison, Carroll, and Culpeper. Wild hogs are not good for Virginia wildlife for a number of reasons, but for turkey hunters they are a concern because they depredate turkey (grouse and other ground nesting birds) nests. In the future, be aware that the Department is working with the USDA Wildlife Services to eliminate hogs in Virginia. If you see a wild hog please call our Wildlife Conflict Helpline (1-855-571-9003).

A majority (68%) of cooperators used decoys. This rate has not changed since decoys were first introduced.

We used the reported spur lengths to put cooperators birds into three categories (Jake, 2 year-old, and 3+ year-old). A majority (65%) of birds were older (3+). A good number (28%) were 2-year-old birds. Cooperators were very selective about harvest Jake, only 7% harvested a Jake.

Gobbler ages were further investigated by separating them into segments of the season. The “Early” segment included hunts through April and the “Late” segment was in May. The average age in the Early Segment was 3.0 years while the average age in the Late segment was 2.8 years. This contradicts the thinking

that younger birds are harvested earlier in the season. The average weight of a whole bird in the Early segment was 19.5 pounds. Late segment birds were lighter (18.9 pounds).

Cooperators frequently (49%) killed birds that came in alone. Many cooperators had their pick of gobblers to harvest as they came in bachelor groups of gobblers (25%) or gobblers with hens (13%). The final category, a gobbler with hens, was the least common (13%) observation cooperators reported.

Finally, we asked cooperators to rate their 2017 season. The results are as follows: Excellent (27%), Good (34%), Fair (24%), Poor (14%) and no opinion (1%).

Thank You!

I would like to thank everyone that contributed to this survey and I hope you find it interesting reading. There is a small following of Cooperators that have been with the survey since the beginning in 1987 – amazing, I sincerely appreciate your dedication! There are a good number of cooperators with 15, 20, and 25+ years of surveys – I can thank you enough.

Best wishes to you for a safe and enjoyable spring season. Please do not hesitate to contact me anytime with any questions you have turkey conservation in Virginia. I can be reached most of the time at either 540-667-5694 (desk) or 540-569-0822 (cell). Email is always a good alternative; you can reach me at gary.norman@dgif.virginia.gov.



Figure 1. Regional boundaries for Virginia Spring Gobbler Season Survey

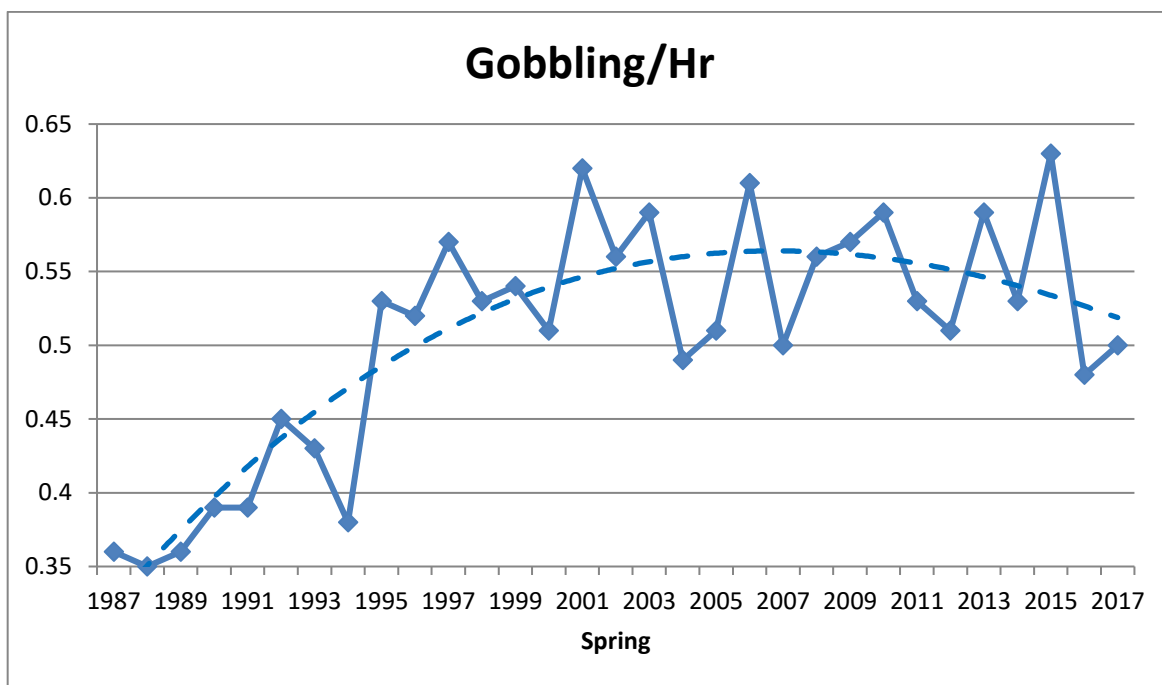


Figure 2. Gobbling per hour reported by Virginia Spring Gobbler Season Cooperators.

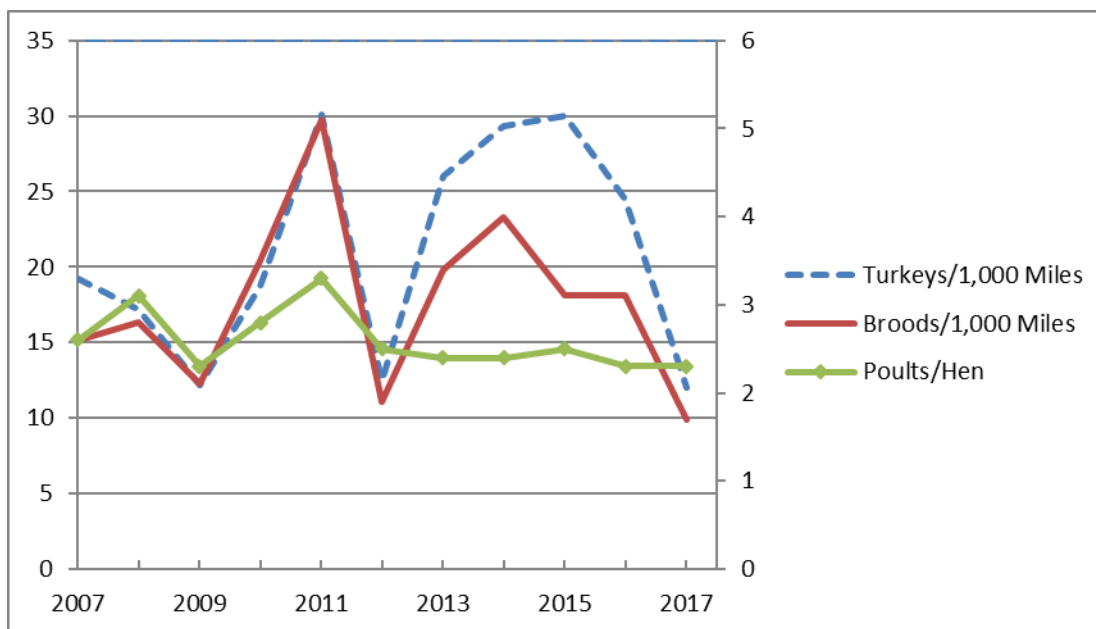


Figure 3. Turkeys seen, broods seen, and poult per hen in Virginia from 2007-2017 as observed by Department staff.

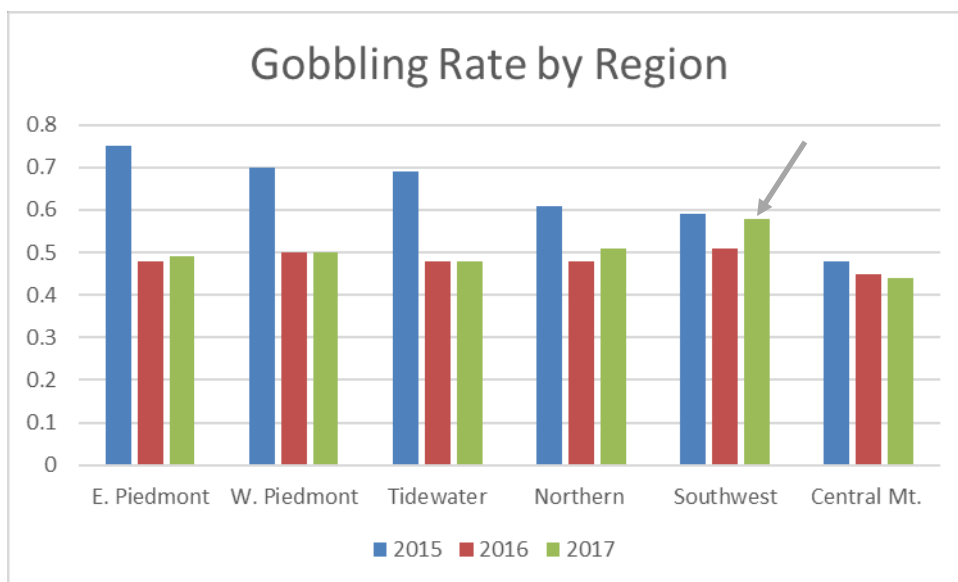


Figure 4. Gobbling rates (heard per hour) by region in Virginia, 2015-17.

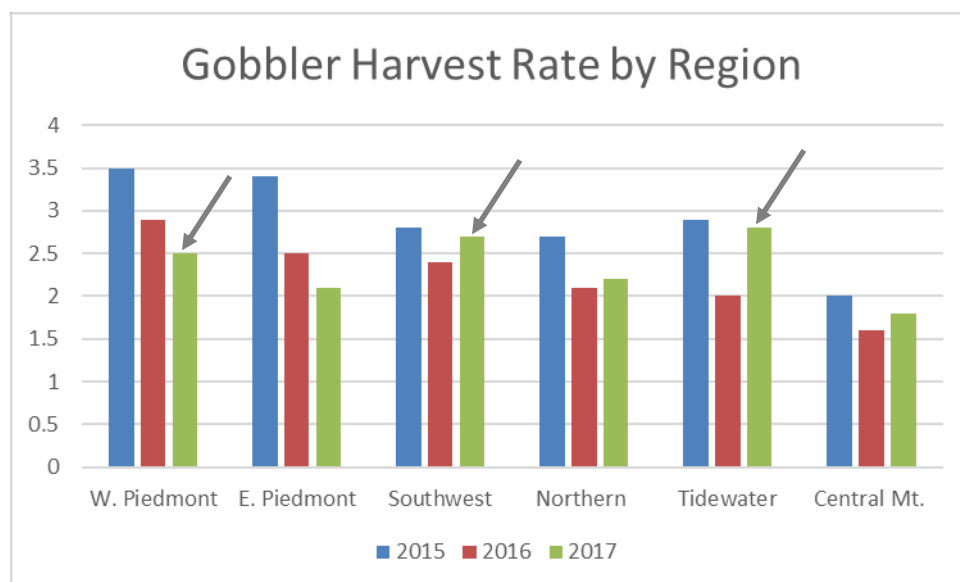


Figure 5. Harvest rates (killed/100 hours) of gobblers by region in Virginia, 2015-17.

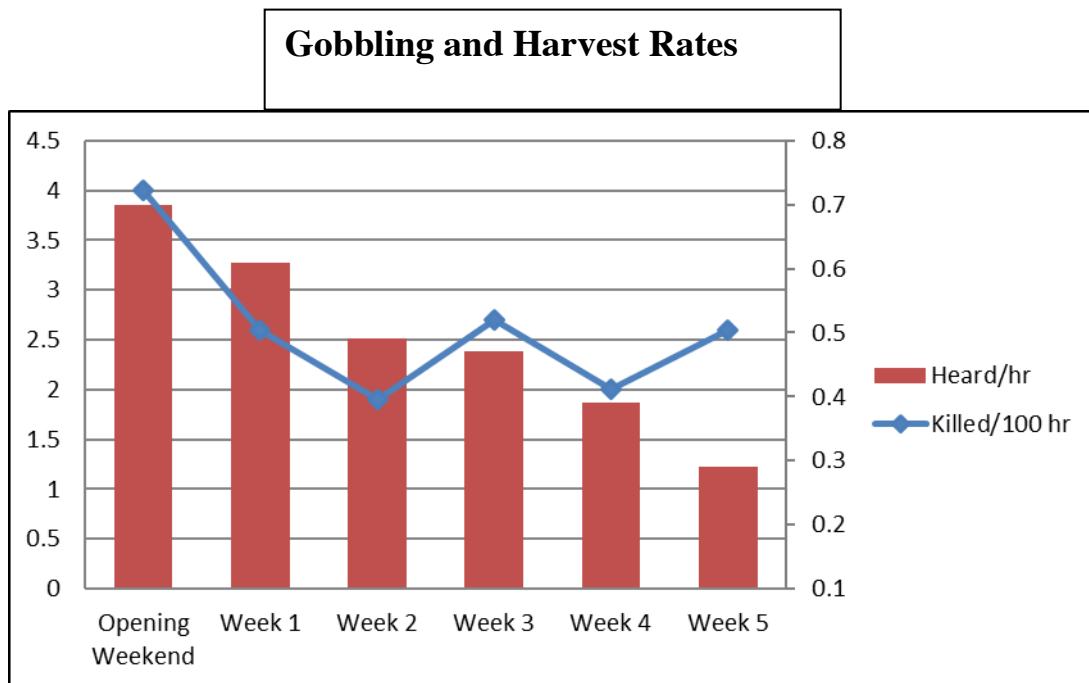


Figure 6. Gobbling (heard/hour) and harvest (killed/100 hours) rates reported in 2017 in Virginia.

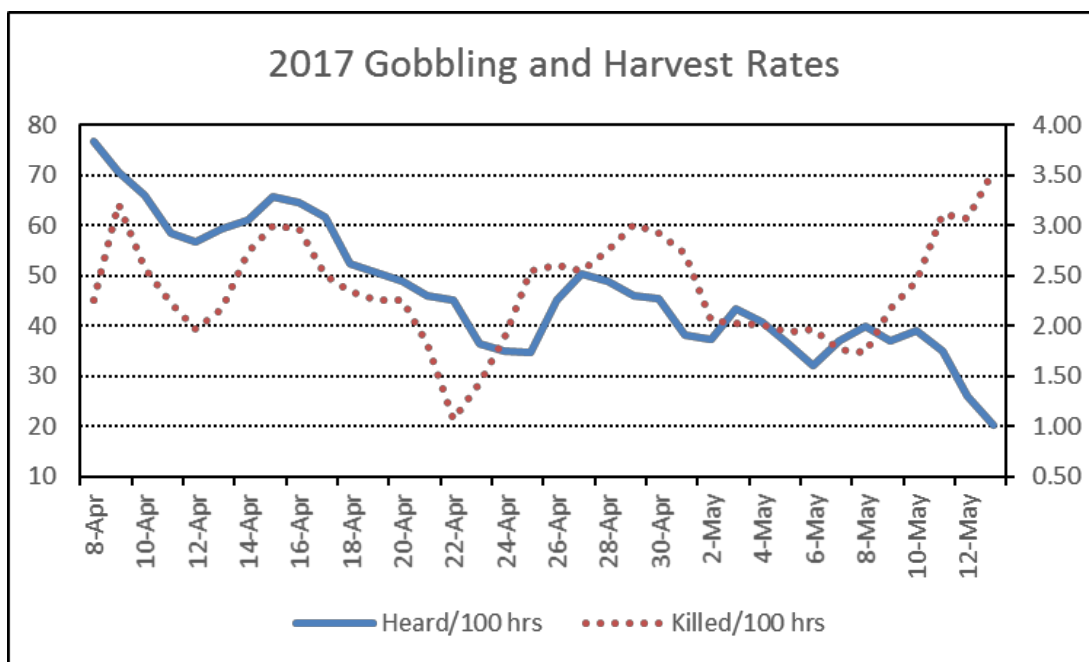


Figure 7. Moving averages of daily gobbling rates (heard/hour) and harvest rates (killed/100 hours) in Virginia, 2017.

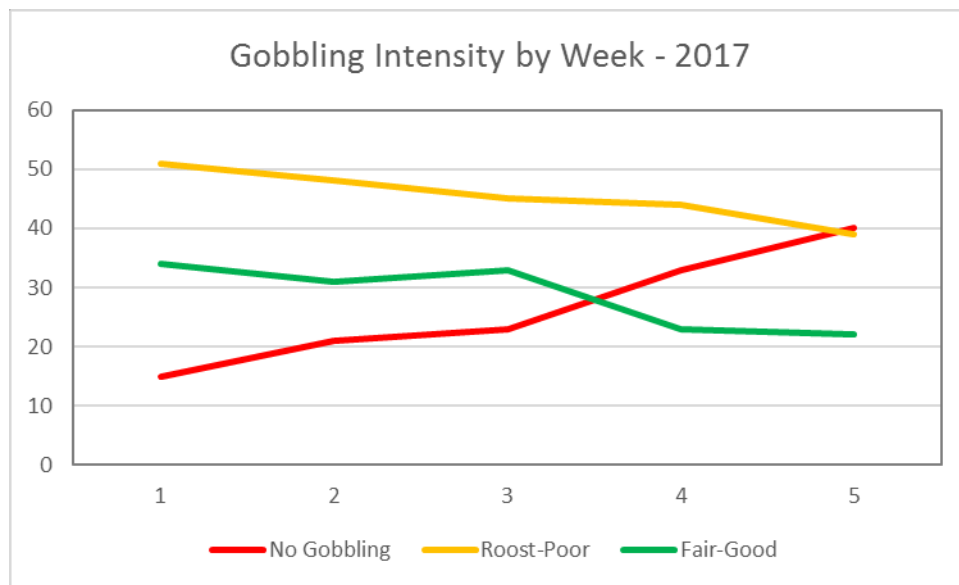


Figure 8. Percentage of spring gobbler hunts for intensity category by week in Virginia in 2017.

Appendix A. Cooperator observations and comments from 2017 season. Numbers following comment are Cooperator's ID Number. If names are not provided on the survey form, the cooperators observations and comments will not be included. Comments on rifles are not included.

WEATHER

Good: 9580, 1470, 2959

Bad or not very good: 9999, 9999. 3505, 1627, 6202

Warm then Cool: 2215, 6415, 9999, 0840

Wet or cold spring: 0716, 8511, 3673, 3825, 1540, 9999, 8507, 4336

Early spring: 2719, 5565, 6239, 6586

Rainy: 0203, 8511, 6789, 1755, 5321, 8113, 5884, 1717, 0256

Windy: 8511, 5321, 1717, 0198, 3080

Weather affects activity: 9777

GOBBLING

Good: 0347, 9401, 1844, 7341, 1007

Fair: 1470

Poor: 9999, 9999, 7921, 3437, 3825, 0349, 0203, 5827, 9999, 9336, 5552, 2929, 2858, 2198

Less than before: 1647, 9602, 0198, 2370, 2339

Gobbled on roost then not on ground: 9510, 0716

Gobbling early in morning: 9999

Toms silent coming in: 1540

Gobbled good first week: 2719, 4384, 8041

Gobbled good first 2 weeks: 3080, 1831

Gobbled less second week of season: 0256

Gobbled at sunset: 9999

POPULATION

Populations up: 5036, 4710, 7581, 8680, 3353, 9999

Population down or low: 1647, 9999, 0877, 9510, 9999, 4340, 1964, 5337, 9336, 3316, 0472, 2858, 5245

Lots of jakes: 5036, 9999

Few jakes: 9999, 9024, 9510, 1230, 2592

Lots of 2 year old gobblers: 5561, 1627

Populations OK: 0349

Plenty of hens: 4710, 3732, 1634

Very few or not many hens: 9999, 9777, 9999

Few turkeys on Federal Land: 9161

Many turkeys on National Forest: 0256, 9401

SURVEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Need column for jakes: 9835, 5592

Thanks for early survey: 6415

Extra survey great: 6415

Need question on habitat on survey: 0840

Should have no number of gobblers heard instead of gobbling column: 5036

Liked dead animal section: 6972

Online survey would be nice: 9835, 6352, 7670

Add fog to survey: 2459

Survey hard to fold: 9999

Communicate reasons for decisions on survey: 2459

LIKED SEASON OR NOT

Enjoyed the season: 0347, 9472, 9999, 7341, 2929

Good season: 0256, 9401, 9999, 7219, 8854, 8779, 7766, 9999, 3331, 9999

Fair season: 6415

Difficult: 8511, 3266

THANK YOU

Thanks Gary Norman for good work: 3508, 6415, 2592, 4499, 2858, 8646, 9999, 7219
0349, 9160, 1627, 0793, 9846, 9936, 1007

Thanks Gary Norman, VDGIF & NWTF: 9999

Thanks VDGIF: 4455, 7219, 3437, 1037, 6356, 7045, 6164, 9999, 5180, 4559, 7341,
5872, 5321, 8113, 2157, 6201, 3138, 8084, 8680, 5592, 1831

Good turkey management plan: 1411

VDGIF is doing a great job for disabled veterans: 6415

POACHERS, HUNTER PRESSURE AND CHECK IN SYSTEM

Stop poaching: 5123

Need CPOs in several counties: 6415, 5123, 9999

Finally got CPOs in every county in Northern Neck: 2959

Less hunters this season: 8680

Public lands too pressured by hunters: 9024, 1548

No pressure on private land: 9999

Poachers printing extra license: 6951

Hard to check in turkeys on flip phone: 1234

Do not like phone in procedure: 3408

Stricter penalties for not tagging or exceeding limits: 2959

DOGS

Too many dogs: 9999

LENGTH OF DAY HUNTING AND SUNDAY

Sunday hunting on all lands and not just private land: 0349

No to Sunday hunting: 0137, 9602, 5434, 2339

Likes all day hunting: 3508, 5339, 1305, 9999

Hunt all day full season: 3508, 9846, 0198

No to all day hunting: 8434, 1549

SEASON DATES

Open 1 week earlier: 1647, 9999, 3707, 1844, 3015, 0072, 9999, 4559, 5872, 6392

Open 2 weeks earlier: 2858, 5304

Start season earlier and end later: 0889

All day season earlier: 2338

End season 1 week earlier: 4559, 5872, 1305

All day season all season: 3080

All day season 1 week longer: 4312

Open season on April 7, 2018: 1627

Leave season as is: 6415, 2193, 7341, 9999, 7191

Season should vary by county: 0957

Shorten season: 6406

FALL SEASON

Close fall turkey season during deer season: 1470, 5339, 6637

Reduce hen hunting in fall: 2959

Stop hen hunting only in fall: 9510, 3316, 0472

Need to hunt in December: 6392

Fall season to long or spread out: 2215, 9999

Shorten fall season: 9999, 1470, 7219, 1964

January season is not good idea: 6406

Keep fall season with dogs legal: 4499, 8646

LIMITS AND LICENSE

Limit is good: 6415, 8854, 7191, 7341, 4340

Cut limit back to 2: 9999, 9851, 7342, 5434, 2339

**Daily limit should be one bird: 2193, 8779, 5615, 4130, 1171, 3316, 0472, 6951, 1964, 8947
5593, 8718, 6406, 4340**

Add hen only tag in fall: 5186, 0137

Limit to 1 hen in fall three gobblers in spring: 1634

Limit to 2 birds a day: 3707, 6789, 3138, 7670, 4517, 2858

Bag limits should vary by county: 0957

Go back to old license format: 8718

Add one bird to limit: 9999, 4710

Increase fall kill numbers: 3732

Regulations OK: 7341, 6415

Nonresident license is confusing and difficult: 9472, 5036, 5764

New license purchase is difficult: 8511, 0198

Online license is abused: 6951

All license should be one on one for hunting, trapping and fishing: 0151

Like APP for harvest reporting: 5561

FANNING

No to fanning: 0472, 5036, 1208, 9999, 1540, 8779, 4559, 5615, 5593, 9401, 8854, 2193, 7342

No to fans on public land: 9713, 5339, 7191

Fanning should be personal choice: 6918

If fanning is legal then no rifles: 4644

Safety is a concern for fanning: 9024, 2459, 9999, 4517, 2370, 4455

Enforcement of fanning regulations would be difficult: 7670

One must first check turkey for beard before shooting at fan: 9742

Took three gobblers with fan: 3508

OTHER ANIMALS

Called in coyote: 9999

Called in and shot coyote sneaking to decoy: 3508

Coyote came by: 9999

Too many coyotes: 9999, 0176, 9999, 4756, 8041, 9999, 5827, 9999, 1831

Killed coyote first day: 6239

Partner killed coyote: 0349

Predator population too high: 9999

Coyote bounty: 9999

Too many bears: 4756

5 Coyotes circled me howled around me in thicket: 9445

Saw crippled gobbler: 6356

Called in red fox: 9835

Bear with 1 cub: 7219

Called in bobcat: 1002, 1549

Need to get rid of coyotes in Pittsylvania County: 5827

Saw 5 Bald Eagles in Highland County: 3437

Found Box Turtle I initialed in 2008: 983j5

I watched DGIF Personnel release 6 coyotes in Pittsylvania County 25 years ago: 5827

Saw hen with beard: 7045, 1831, 5339

Saw bear: 1171, 0957

Heard no owls: 1627

Heard bobwhites: 8041, 2157

Need predator research and how it affects turkey population:

Found stolen motor cycle in pond and called warden: 6352

Found hog tracks: 1593

Called in several barred owls: 0753

No deer or turkey on National Forest: 9999

Lots of coyote sign: 1548

Called in hen with 6 inch beard: 2929

Decoy attacked by red-tailed hawk: 5180

Black coyote came to call: 6164

Gobbler and Jake fought: 2338

Gobbler had no spurs: 9598

Better turkey management on National Forest: 5615

OPINIONS

Both deer and turkey needs help in Bath County: 8646

Gobblers with hens early in season: 0110, 9999

Hit coyote with truck 3rd week of season: 6239

Lack of maintenance on roads, ditches and pipes: 1548

Gobblers with hens during whole season: 1755, 0716

1 ½ inch spur length, longest in 25 years: 0905

CPOs should make presence known by stopping by stores, etc: 7191

Good season in Grayson Co. 1844

Gobbler had no spurs: 9598

Make regulation decisions based on biology and conservation ideals: 6931

4 Jakes tried to mate with hen decoy: 1831

Populations declining in Alleghany County: 9588

There is never enough funds in the DGIF budget: 9161

1 Gobbler and 4 hens feeding in bean field: 9999

Lee County has more hens and less Gobblers: 1844

Three deer tried to stomp decoy: 9999

Keep short season in Warren County: 6637

Missed gobbler with bow: 9835

Need CPO in Alleghany County: 6415

Open Bigwoods SFR Wildlife Management Area to Sundays: 5339

Need better habitat on National Forest: 6239, 4130

Few Turkeys in Middlesex County: 9999

Early mating season: 5186

A lot of road hunter use rifles: 9401

Pass law where all dogs must have collars: 9999

Create system matching hunters to landowners on available land: 1755

No controlled burns on National Forest in April: 0256

Encourage landowners to allow turkey hunting: 2339

One gobbler had wound in side like rifle shot: 3331

Peacock followed hen turkey: 4952

Improve habitat on private land: 3825, 5180

Lots of deer info out but not much on turkeys: 3825

3 hunts ruined by coyotes: 9999

Hen fed with decoys for 15 minutes: 3353

Grouse walked by me and fed with squirrels: 5036

Hunted turkeys in Colorado: 5884

Improve habitat on George Washington and Jefferson National Forest: 5186

Stop spring burns by forest service: 9851

Hen was shot in neck and head: 9160

Hire more CPOs: 9999, 8113, 3080

Coyote came to flopping turkey: 6696

Gobbler scared off by coyote: 0889

If turkey populations decline shorten fall season: 6637

Need more CPOs on George Washington National Forest: 3233

Friend bought a remote control gobbler with fan: 3879

Good mushroom hunting: 1593

Hunt with one man and caller: 3879

Open up foot paths to walking and in case of fire: 6406

Need to carry pistols when training rabbit pups to shoot coyotes: 7581

Several woodcock fed around me while calling gobbler: 7937

Plan not working for Augusta, Highland and Bath Counties: 3186

Sportsmanship has a wide definition on public land: 9713

Saw 8 gobblers before season and few during season: 5592

Too many hunters in woods are educating turkeys: 9602

More hawks than I ever saw: 9999

Raffle off blind or decoy for those who complete survey: 7766

Coyote interrupted hunt: 7246

Birds wary of decoys after first week: 7246

Need demographics of women hunters: 7766

Heard 5 shots fast, first 3 then 2: 1158

Populations down in Deltaville: 5337

Plant food plots for turkeys: 9999

Do not go fully online for Hunter Ed Course: 7670

Saw 400-500 Lb bear: 9999

Saw gobbler mate with hen: 5884

Saw smoky phase hen: 7670, 1831

Offer more products in DGIF store like long sleeve camo shirts and caps: 5339

Tripple bearded gobbler: 0198

Most hunting lands are leased: 1647

Crossbows increase kill in archery season: 9999

Global warming affects seasons: 8964

Close gates to public land: 9401

YOUTH DAY

Took youth hunting: 0347

Get more kids involved: 2339

Youth killed gobbler: 9999, 8014, 5245, 5304

Mandatory check stations on youth days:

Use some January days around thanksgiving for youth: 2215

Make entire week before regular season for youth: 7670

No youth day: 5434

NESTING

Poor hatch last spring: 9024

Saw hen with 6 poults: 5339